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Terry Hyland

*University of Bolton*, [t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk](mailto:t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk)

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**ON THE UPGRADING OF VOCATIONAL STUDIES:**  
**Analysing prejudice and subordination in English education**

*Professor Terry Hyland*  
*Faculty of Arts, Science & Education*  
*Bolton Institute*  
*Bolton BL2 1JW (t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk)*

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## **Abstract**

*The upgrading of vocational studies in general – and vocational education and training programmes and qualifications in particular – has never been so high on the political agenda. Current policy initiatives include reconstructing Modern Apprenticeships, re-organising the 14-19 phase to enhance vocational A-levels and GCSEs, and introducing Foundation Degrees incorporating a central work-based element. Whether all these reforms will prove more successful than the many failed experiments of the last half-century depends upon on how far they present a fundamental challenge to the deep-seated prejudice and negative valuing of vocationalism which is endemic in the system. An anatomy of this prejudice is presented against the background of the most popular strategies for enhancing vocational studies and creating parity of esteem for programmes and qualifications in this sphere. It is concluded that changing terminology and tinkering with pathways will not bring about the necessary values transformation required to achieve the desired objectives..*

## Introduction

Attempts to enhance the status of vocational education and training (VET) and create parity of esteem for vocational as against academic learning and qualifications go back at least as far as the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction was convened to make recommendations for the improvement of the English system in the light of superior European models (Musgrave,1970). Since then, the State's response to problems in this sphere has typically been one of 'crisis management...giving rise to schemes and initiatives designed to limit the social damage which followed de-industrialisation' (Esland,1990,p.v). More recently, in introducing the flagship University for Industry (now *Ufi Learndirect*) blueprint, Hillman (1997) remarked that:

Deficiencies in British education and training have been a cause for concern for policy-makers for 150 years...there has been a flurry of reforms in the last ten years...an array of short-term and narrowly focused initiatives...(ibid.,p.29).

Amongst this 'flurry of reforms' were the many schemes associated with the 'new vocationalism' (Avis, et.al.,1996; Hyland,1999) of the 1980s and 1990s – the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, Youth Training, National and General National Vocational Qualifications (N/GNVQs), Training Credits and Training and Enterprise Councils. Only time will tell whether the post-1997 reforms in this area – *Learndirect*, New Deal Welfare to Work programmes, Curriculum 2000, Learning and Skills Councils and reconstructed Modern Apprenticeships – will finally solve the perennial problems of British VET.

What can be said with some certainty is that the emphasis on upgrading and enhancing vocational studies – whether at the 14-19 stage or in post-compulsory education and training (PCET) in general – has never been so high on the political agenda. In setting out the policy template and mission for PCET in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, referred to the problem of having 'to contend with an elitist academic culture which has failed to

value technical study and attainment'(DfEE,2000,para.26). More recently, the new Secretary of State, Estelle Morris, has observed that 'vocational education has been persistently undervalued' and outlined plans to 'break down the traditional prejudice against vocational education as a route to success'(DfES,2001,paras.4.2,4.4). In a similar vein, the recent Green Paper on the re-organisation of the 14-19 system was introduced with the forthright statement that 'we should no longer tolerate a culture that devalues vocational learning', and that the aim of the new 14-19 programmes was a 'vocational renaissance that captures the imagination of young people and challenges prejudice'(DfES,2002,p.1).

### **Anti-Vocational Prejudice**

Before prejudice can be challenged it has to be clearly described and understood. In a recent examination of the development and reform of vocational qualifications in the 1980s and 1990s - involving a painstaking analysis of policy and legislation combined with interviews with leading players in the field - Raggatt & Williams (1999) reported a number of observations about the way the educational establishment regarded vocational education in the period. Officials in the former Department of Education and Science (DES) freely admitted that the 'whole area of vocational education, training and qualifications was...a backwater in the DES', and an education minister noted that:

people in the DES had never come across it [vocational education].  
They did not expect their children to come across it...So there was a  
complete cultural problem with the status of vocational education...(p.183).

The fact that, as other commentators over the years have observed, discourse about vocational studies is always somehow about 'other people's children' serves to illustrate graphically what Lewis (1991) has called the 'historical problem of vocational education' which is its subordinate status in relation to general academic studies and that fact that it 'has traditionally been viewed in class terms' (pp.96-7).

Examining the historical development of vocational studies in British schools, Coffey (1992) noted that its 'place and scope ...has been sparse, limited in intent and fragmented'(p.2), and Maclure (1991) has referred to the 'historic failure of English education to integrate the academic and the practical, the general and the vocational' (p.28). Moreover, Lewis (1991) suggests that 'whether in the developed or developing world...vocational education has been conceived of as being unworthy of the elite, and more suited to the oppressed or unprivileged classes' (p.97). In a similar vein, Skilbeck et al. (1994) note that, in England and Wales, the 'educational tradition has been inhospitable to a broad and comprehensive vocational philosophy' (p.138), and all this in the face of a 'resurgence of interest in the world's industrialised countries in the vocational dimension of education' (p.22).

### **Origins: Saber-Tooth Vocationalism**

If educational processes are viewed in such broad, non-formal terms as, to use White's description, general features of 'upbringing' (1997, pp. 82-3), then vocational studies is as old - and since it is vital to survival and reproduction - arguably older than any other form of education. As Coffey (1992) notes, all early education can be said to have had an 'explicit vocational function' in that:

Economic life was primarily sustained by the passing on of manual skills from one generation to the next. Most people were educated 'on the job', in particular by experiencing some sort of formal or informal apprenticeship (p.11).

Both the formal and informal educational practices of early societies - with the specifically vocational function of inculcating knowledge, skills and values required for survival and - must have included the passing on to young people the main elements of hunting, fishing, farming, cooking, making clothing and caring for the young. Harold Benjamin's famous *Saber-Tooth Curriculum* (1939) - consisting of the skills of fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing and saber-tooth tiger-scaring - though obviously factitious with a primarily allegorical purpose, is probably a reasonably accurate account of how such early vocational education and training (VET) practices

eventually came to be formalised and systematised as tribes and communities developed religious, puberty and organisational/leadership mores and rituals (Wilds & Lottich, 1970).

Since such vocational practices seem to be not just natural but also absolutely crucial in terms of human survival and progress, the intriguing question is why educational processes came to be hierarchically stratified and differentiated, with different forms and purposes distinguished in terms of status and prestige in ways which generally disfavour VET . There is a broad consensus amongst commentators on the origins of education in different societies that - in terms of the original motives for formalising educational practices - the vocational function had pride of place. Williams (1961), for instance, suggests that the 'first English schools, from the late sixth century, had a primarily vocational intention' (p.147) and, according to Lawson & Silver (1978), even the liberal studies of the early grammar schools and universities can be said to have had a markedly vocational thrust since its central purpose was to equip people 'for careers as teachers, preachers, civil and canon lawyers, officials and administrators' (p.31). Indeed, the 'staple' of the liberal studies curriculum, Latin language study, is described as a 'vocational skill' by Lawson & Silver (p.48), and its function as a Renaissance puberty rite - insofar as it 'strengthened and toughened the mind' (Ong,1970,p.247) - has been well documented, as has the parallel 'apprenticeship' status of the bachelor degree in medieval universities in terms of preparation for master status (Carr,1997).

Given all this, the notion that the vocational aspect of education would eventually come to have a second-rate status, subordinate to general, academic studies, seems most surprising if not counter-intuitive. How can this phenomenon be explained? The evolution of Benjamin's 'saber-tooth curriculum' affords us some clues in this respect. As New-Fist, one of the more thoughtful members of the Chellean community, started to reflect on the knowledge and skills necessary for the survival of his tribe - fish-grabbing with bare hands, woolly-horse clubbing and saber-tooth tiger scaring with fire - he saw the advantages of teaching these vital arts to his children and proposed a formal system of education and training consisting of these three elements.

For a long time, the conservative members of the tribe resisted these suggestions, but eventually - as New-Fist's practice demonstrated clearly the benefits gained by teaching children rather than trusting to luck - the pioneer educator's ideas were adopted. Unfortunately, very soon after the saber-tooth curriculum had been formalised, a new ice age came over the land and the old skills were rendered obsolete. However, notwithstanding the fact that the tribe's survival in drastically altered circumstances now depended totally upon the new crafts of catching fish with nets, building snares to catch antelopes and killing bears, the old saber-tooth curriculum remained unchanged. The venerable elders of the tribe answered all calls for curriculum reform by declaring that – if the reformers truly knew the difference between education and training – they:

would know that the essence of true education is timelessness. It is something that endures through changing conditions like a solid rock standing squarely and firmly in the middle of a ranging torrent. You must know that there are some eternal verities, and the saber-tooth curriculum is one of them! (ibid.,pp13-14).

This account serves to illustrate graphically - by means of anagogic narrative far more powerful than historical sources - the likely origins of the vocational/academic divide in education in a way which highlights the foundation of the dualisms of education and training, the general and the practical, and the connection of cultural studies with general virtue and other studies with specific utility. Benjamin's story also demonstrates forcefully and imaginatively the sheer arbitrariness of such bifurcated reasoning and points to its roots in irrational conservatism and unreflective prejudice.

### **Vocational/Academic Divisions**

Such hierarchical curriculum differences, eventually linked to social stratification, were later to be codified precisely by Dewey in his attempts to break down the 'antithesis of vocational and cultural education' based on the false oppositions of 'labour and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind' (Dewey,1916/1966,p.306). Although there is a tendency to regard the so-called academic/vocational divide in Britain - with all the practical consequences in terms of curricular stratification and differential values which disfavour the vocational - as a relatively recent



phenomenon, perhaps developing in the years following the 1944 Education Act, the roots of division can be traced much further back. As Silver & Brennan (1988) have noted, 'education and training, theory and practice, the liberal and the vocational - the polarities have centuries of turbulent history' (p.3).

Schofield (1972, pp.149-50) locates the original source of liberal education in those activities associated with 'freeing the mind from error' which has its roots in Plato's distinction between 'genuine' knowledge (acquired through rational reflection) and mere 'opinion' (acquired for specific purposes). Moreover, such hierarchical divisions were from the outset inextricably linked to social class stratification and an axiology of relative values about educational activities. In the *Republic*, the relative value accorded to the 'Forms' of knowledge by Plato are fully realised in the various kinds of education provided for rulers, guardians and workers in the ideal state (in addition to the distinctions between 'banal' knowledge, suited to slaves, and knowledge worthy of free citizens). The 'foundation myth' of the ideal state suggests that God 'added gold to the composition of those of you who are qualified to be rulers...he put silver in the auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest' (Lee trans., 1965, p.160). Similarly, in *The Politics* Aristotle (Sinclair trans., 1962) offers an account of rival educational aims and purposes – essentially valuing disinterested theory above applied practice - which is uncannily similar to the vocational/academic (technical/liberal) discourse which has characterised educational debates since the establishment of state schooling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Once such hierarchical and normative distinctions had been made by philosophers it was almost inevitable that they should come to be connected - through formal systems of education - to social stratification and political power. As Schofield (1972) explains:

The passing of time merely emphasised the distinctions which Plato made. Studies which were valuable in themselves, especially the Classics, became associated with the privileged class or elite in society. They were directly related to the concept of a courtier, a gentleman, a man of affairs, and later the public schools. Liberal education always carried with it a suggestion of privilege and privileged position, of not needing to work for one's living (pp.151-2).

The linking of such ideals to classical studies and the public school/university elite in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain (which produced the politically powerful who were to define mass compulsory schooling after 1870) served to bring about a class-dominated, bifurcated curriculum - in which vocational studies were always subordinate to academic pursuits - which bedevils British education to this day. Educational debate at the time was distorted by such irrational prejudice which, as Skilbeck et.al. (1994) put it, was 'compounded by anti-democratic sentiments and arcadian ideals' (p.160) which, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were to stand in the way of the development of a national, unified system of education in which vocational studies and the preparation for working life had its rightful and proper place.

### **Knowledge, Values and Biology**

What seems to underpin the hierarchical divisions in this sphere is not so much the *nature* of knowledge in terms of arts, sciences, or disciplines but whether it is described as intellectual or theoretical as opposed to being applied or productive. Now, although such epistemological distinctions are challenged by critics who seek to break down the general/vocational studies dichotomy (as indicated below), there can be little doubt that their centrality in Ancient Greek philosophy had played a major part in reinforcing such dualisms in educational systems. In Plato's scheme of education outlined in the *Republic*, 'dialectic' (philosophy) is the 'crown of the educational process' (Nettleship, 1935, p.133) since it leads us to a knowledge of the 'Forms' which represent the one source of unchanging, eternal truths. Similarly, for Aristotle, practical knowledge was inferior to theoretical knowledge because it involved 'choice among relative goods' whereas theoretical knowledge was linked to 'certainty' (Hickman, 1990, pp.107-8); productive knowledge was even more inferior because it was linked to the 'making of things out of contingent matter' (ibid., p.108).

The contingency of the values underpinning relationships between knowledge and production may be elaborated and explained in terms of more fundamental connections between educational values and genetic/biological traits identified in Pinker's (1998) work in cognitive psychology.

He begins by making the interesting observation that the 'more biologically frivolous and vain the activity, the more people exalt it. Art, literature, music, wit, religion and philosophy are thought to be not just pleasurable but noble'. Pinker then goes on (clearly mischievously) to ask 'Why do we pursue the trivial and futile and experience them as sublime?' (p.521). There is an open admission that such a question may be 'horribly philistine' and Pinker is well aware that there are ways of assigning values to activities outside the perspective of evolutionary biology.

However, although it is always necessary to distinguish biology from culture, there are considerable insights to be derived from considering Pinker's challenging arguments. Many of the activities which humans consider to be so intrinsically valuable and profound are, in biological terms, 'non-adaptive by-products' of the consequences of having a mind which, in turn, is the result of the impact of natural selection upon DNA molecules. Our most prized possessions - art, music, philosophy - can thus, as Dawkins (1991) puts it, be explained in terms of the 'blind watchmaker' of natural selection which has 'no purpose in mind...no vision, no foresight, no sight at all' (p.5). Although the mind, on Pinker's account, is primarily 'driven by goal states that served biological fitness in ancestral environments, such as food, sex, safety, parenthood, friendship, status and knowledge. That toolbox can be used to assemble Sunday afternoon projects of dubious adaptive value'. This perspective is explained in terms of the fact that:

Some parts of the mind register the attainment of increments of fitness by giving us a sensation of pleasure. Other parts use a knowledge of cause and effect to bring about goals. Put them together and you get a mind that rises to a biologically pointless challenge: figuring out how to get at the pleasure circuits of the brain and deliver little jolts of enjoyment without the inconvenience of wringing bona fide fitness increments from the harsh world (p.524)

Of course, once the mind has created cultural and scientific objects these come to have a life of their own, and Pinker would not deny that their existence and justification can then be found outside of human biology. What this perspective does, however, is provide us with an alternative explanation of why certain educational pursuits (typically thought of as liberal or academic) come to be prized more highly than others (labelled vocational studies) connected with work and

survival. On this account, we can certainly explain the attachment of the elders of the saber-tooth community to 'eternal verities' which bore no relationship to the well-being and survival of the tribe.

### **Reconciliation Strategies**

Since the philosophical origins of the academic/vocational (or general/vocational, liberal/technical) dichotomy can be located in fundamental distinctions between pure (disinterested) and applied (instrumental) knowledge, many strategies for reconciling the divisions have sought to show that, either so-called liberal pursuits can be construed in vocational terms, or (more commonly) that vocational studies can in fact be interpreted in a liberal or academic manner. An interesting early example of this sort of revisionism can be found in Adams' (1933) *Modern Developments in Educational Practice* which insists that 'all education must affect our future life either adversely or favourably, and to that extent all education is vocational, as preparing us for the vocation of life' (p.50). A more recent example of this sort of strategy is Silver & Brennan's (1988) advocacy of 'liberal vocationalism' in higher education which involves the introduction of hybrid courses combining arts and science subjects, in addition to the incorporation of liberal/general educational elements in vocational programmes in fields such such as engineering and business studies (not unlike the general/liberal studies introduced into further education vocational programmes in the 1950s and 1960s, and Key Skills into current programmes; Hyland,1999).

A key feature of such strategies consists in demonstrating that liberal and vocational pursuits have many characteristics in common. Thus, we have R.S. Peters (1978) observing that both theoretical and practical pursuits can be engaged in 'for their own sakes' (p.9) and Walsh (1978) arguing that 'once the real values of liberal pursuits are stated and classified...we can find the same values in practical pursuits' (p.62). In addition, it is surely worth noting that the one common unifying element in relation to the main divisions in this sphere - vocational/academic, general/technical, education/training, theory/ practice, mind/body - is precisely and centrally the

process and activity of *learning*. What matters, therefore, is not so much any bridging of the divide, showing that vocational and academic pursuits have much in common or establishing a liberal vocationalism or vocational liberalism (which, in any case, only serves to emphasise the differences) but strategies which ensure that *vocational learning* is rich, deep and facilitates the progression and continuity which is essential to learning careers, working life and lifelong learning needs and objectives. It is this idea of a learning career - illustrated fully in Bloomer's (1996) conception of 'studentship' through which 'students can exert influence over the curriculum in the creation and confirmation of their own personal careers' (p.140) - which deserves a central place in strategies designed to enhance vocational studies. If such a conception of learning - whether formal or informal, work-based or college-based - is located within a framework informed by Dewey's broad conception of vocational studies as a range of activities which 'stress the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation' (1966,p.316), then we could at the beginning of a journey which leads to the elusive parity of esteem for VET in the post-school sector.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of three decades of continuous reform and development in this sphere, the problems remain and the latest solutions linked to the re-organisation of 14-19 education represent the same tinkering with labels and tracks characteristic of previous failed experiments. None of this challenges the deep-seated prejudices and negative values outlined above. Until a new philosophical infrastructure for VET – now beginning to emerge in ideas on work-based learning (Hager,2000) and apprenticeship (Guile & Young,2002) linked to broad conceptions of work and social capital (Winch,2000; Hyland,2000) – is established and used to underpin superstructural reforms, the problems surrounding the subordinate status of vocational pursuits will remain with us.

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